



'T WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE SUMMER

(An Imaginary Watch-Night with the Weather Man)

By ROBERT C. BENCHLEY

It was 11 o'clock on the night of June 20—last Tuesday. We were seated in the office of the Weather Bureau on the twenty-ninth floor of the Whitehall Building, the Weather Man and I, and we were waiting for summer to come. It was officially due on June 21. We had the almanac's word for it and years and years of precedent, but still the Weather Man was skeptical.

It had been a hard spring for the Weather Man. Day after day he had been forced to run a signed statement in the daily papers to the effect that some time during that day there would probably be showers. And day after day, with a ghastly consistency, his prophecy had come true. People had come to dislike him personally; old jokes about him were brought out and oiled and given a trial spin down the road a piece before appearing in funny columns and vaudeville skits, and the sporting writers, frenzied by the task of filling their space with nothing but tables of batting averages, had become positively libelous.

And now summer was at hand, and with it the promise of the sun. The Weather Man nibbled at his thumb nail. The clock on the wall said 11:15.

"It just couldn't go back on us now," he said, plaintively, "when it means so much to us. It always has come on the 21st."

There was not much that I could say. I didn't want to hold out any false hope, for I am a child in arms in matters of astronomy, or whatever it is that makes weather.

"I often remember hearing my father tell," I ventured, "how every year on the 21st of June summer always used to come, rain or shine, until they came to look for it on that date, and to count from then as the beginning of the season. It seems as if"—

"I know," he interrupted, "but there have been so many upsetting things during the past year. The Mexican trouble—the foundering of the Progressive party—the tonsillitis epidemic—all of them upsetting. We can't check up this year by any other years. All we can do is wait and see."

A gust of wind from Jersey ran along the side of the building, shaking at the windows. The Weather Man shuddered, and looked out of the corner of his eye at the anemometer-register which stood on a table in the middle of the room. It indicated whatever anemometers do indicate when they want to register bad news. I considerably looked out at the window.

"You've no idea," he said at last, in a low voice, "of how this last rainy spell has affected my home life. For the first two or three days, although I got dark looks from slight acquaintances, there was always a cheery welcome waiting for me when I got home, and the Little Woman would say, 'Never mind, Ray, it will soon be pleasant, and we all know that it's not your fault, anyway.'"

"But then, after a week had passed and there had been nothing but rain and showers and rain, I began to notice a change. When I would swing in at the gate she would meet me and say, in a far-away voice, 'Well, what is it for to-morrow?' And I would have to say 'Probably cloudy, with occasional showers and light easterly gales.' At which

she would turn away and bite her lip, and once I thought I saw her eye-lashes wet.

"Then, one night, the break came. It had started out to be a perfect day, just such as one reads about, but along about noon it began to cloud over and soon the rain poured down in rain-gauges-full."

"I was all discouraged, and as I wrote out the forecast for the papers, 'Rain to-morrow and Friday,' I felt like giving the whole thing up and going back to Vermont to live."

"When I got home Alice was there

"Lynch the Weather Man and let the baseball season go on," then I think it is time for us to come to an understanding. I am going over to mother's until you can do better."

The Weather Man got up and went to the window. Out there over the Battery there was a spot casting a sickly glow through the cloud-banks which filled the sky.

"That's the moon up there behind the fog," he said, and laughed a bitter cackle.

It was now 11:45. The thermograph was writing busily in red ink on the

church sociables or sidewalk chats?

"All I have to do is put out a real scorcher or a continued cold snap, and I can drive off the boards the biggest Allied offensive that was ever launched or draw the teeth out of Mexico's most delicate situation. Why, if the Germans were to take a tip from the Preparedness movies and invade New York and had an army corps encamped at the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street, I'll bet, if I should on the same morning uncork the hottest day of the season, that the first remark of nine out of every ten conversations

Suddenly the telegraph over in the corner snapped like a bunch of fire-crackers. In a second the Weather Man was at its side, taking down the message:

"NEW ORLEANS, LA NHRUFKYOTLDMRELPWZWOTUDK HEAVY PRECIPITATION SOUTH WESTERLY GALES LETTER FOLLOWS

NEW ORLEANS U S WEATHER BUREAU

"Poor fellow," muttered the Weather Man, who, even in his own tense excitement did not forget the troubles of

grees line. From our seats we could look out over the Statue of Liberty and see the cloud-dimmed glow which told of a censored moon. The Weather Man was making nervous little pokes at his collar, as if it had a rough edge that was cutting his neck.

Suddenly he gripped the table. Somewhere a clock was beginning to strike twelve. I shut my eyes and waited.

Ten-eleven-twelve! "Look, Newspaper Man, look!" he shrieked and grabbed me by the tie.

I opened my eyes and looked at the thermograph. At the last stroke of the clock the red line had given a little, final quaver on the 50 degree line and then had shot up like a rocket until it struck 72 degrees and lay there trembling and heaving like a runner after a race.

But it was not at this that the Weather Man was pointing. There, out in the murky sky, the stroke of twelve had ripped apart the clouds and a large, milk-fed moon was fairly crashing its way through, laying out a straight-away course of silver cinders across the harbor, and in all parts of the heavens stars were breaking out like a rash. In two minutes it had become a balmy, languorous night. Summer had come!

I turned to the Weather Man. He was wiping the palms of his hands on his hips and looking foolishly happy. I said nothing. There was nothing that could be said.

Before we left the office he stopped to write out the prophecy for Wednesday, June 21, the First Day of Summer. "Fair and warmer, with slowly rising temperature." His hand trembled so as he wrote that he forgot the final "e" in "temperature." Then we went out and he turned toward his home. On Wednesday, June 21, it rained.

Anything to Oblige

"I WISH," said Gladys, coquettishly, "that somebody would do something for me."

"Why," answered Percy, gallantly, "I should be pleased, I'm sure, to do anything for you. What do you want?"

"Oh," continued Gladys, "I want somebody to go down to the newspaper store and buy me a magazine."

"I'll go with pleasure."

"But I've forgotten the name of the old thing."

"Oh, I guess I can find the one you want without much trouble. Were you reading some story?"

"Yes; but I've forgotten the name of that, too. Let-me-see. No; I simply can't recall it. But I'll tell you how you can know which magazine to get. The one I want has a girl's head on the front cover."

CHAPTER II.

"I wonder what can be keeping Percy," said Gladys for the twentieth time. "I wonder if anything could have happened to him. Really, I'm almost worried."

CHAPTER III.

(From the next morning's paper.) Last night, as Policeman Hartigan was patrolling his beat on Anyold Avenue, he noticed what appeared to be a huge pile of magazines on the sidewalk. Investigating closer, he found underneath them the unconscious form of a well dressed man. Apparently the man had been carrying a bundle of summer periodicals, and, the string breaking, they had fallen on and buried him. He was taken in an ambulance to Saint Killjoy's Hospital, where at a late hour he had revived somewhat, but not enough to give his name or to explain his predicament.

"The magazine I want has a girl's head on the cover," he kept repeating.

By an odd coincidence every magazine in the pile under which the man was found had a girl's head on the cover.



WAITING FOR THE DOORS TO OPEN AT THE UNITED STATES WEATHER BUREAU, 17 BATTERY PLACE.

with her things on, waiting for me.

"You needn't tell me what it's going to be to-morrow," she sobbed. "I know. Every one knows. The whole world knows. I used to think that it wasn't your fault, but when the children come home from school crying because they have been plagued for being the Weather Man's children, when every time I go out I know that the neighbors are talking behind my back and saying, 'How does she stand it?' when every paper I read, every bulletin I see, stares me in the face with great letters saying, 'Weather Man predicts more rain,' or

little diagrammed cuff provided for that purpose, writing all about the temperature. The Weather Man inspected the fine, jagged line as it leaked out of the pen on the chart. Then he walked over to the window again and stood looking out over the bay.

"You'd think that people would have a little gratitude," he said in a low voice, "and not hit at a man who has done so much for them. If it weren't for me where would the art of American conversation be to-day? If there were no weather to talk about, how could there be any dinner parties or

would be, 'Looks like a sizzler, eh?'"

"I have saved more reputations and social functions than any other influence in American life, and yet here, when the home office sends me a rummy lot of weather, over which I have no control, everybody jumps on me and says 'weasel-words.'"

He pulled savagely at the window shade and pressed his nose against the pane in silence for a while.

There was no sound but the ticking of the anemometer and the steady scratching of the thermograph. I looked at the clock. 11:47.

his brother weather prophet in New Orleans, "I know just how he feels. I hope he's not married."

He glanced at the clock. It was 11:56. In four minutes summer would be due, and with summer a clearer sky, renewed friendships and a united family for the Weather Man. If it failed him—I dreaded to think of what might happen. It was twenty-nine floors to the pavement below, and I am not a powerful man physically.

Together we sat at the table by the thermograph and watched the red line draw mountain ranges along the 50 de-